# EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF AFFIRMING DEMOCRACY VALUES IN JOHN DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM: MODERN PERSPECTIVE

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#### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of the research is to analyse the capabilities of Dewey's pragmatism in the philosophy of education as a medium for affirming today's values of democracy.

**Methods.** The article is based on a conceptually extended literature review. Such philosophical methods as hermeneutics (to take into account the socio-cultural context in the process of investigating the content of primary sources), interpretation (to study the basic theoretical foundations of the educational process and to explain their practical value) and comparative analysis (to identify similarities or differences between different ideas and conceptions) are applied.

**Results**. The research identified the philosophical dimension of education, making it possible to understand the nature of learning in pragmatism. An investigation is pursued into what role the activity of the subject plays in the learning process, how the importance of freedom is substantiated in communication, and what place in the face of contemporary civilisational challenges has experience as a medium of true knowledge for becoming the ideals of a democratic society.

**Conclusion.** The methodology of pragmatism makes it possible to resolve contradictions in education. The theoretical and practical principles of pragmatism that were substantiated by John Dewey contribute to the formation of an active life position of students, the free and constructive communication between all participants in learning, and the promotion of the ideals of a democratic society. They create an environment for the formation of genuine experience and the development of critical thinking skills as reliable means of protecting against misinformation or the spread of false values and the precondition for the advancement of humanistic values.

Key words: philosophy of education, democratic values, Dewey's pragmatism.

#### INTRODUCTION

Pragmatism emerged as a reaction to the dominant at that time rationalism and metaphysical idealism in Western philosophy. These philosophical traditions had little in common with the practice of real life and could not serve



as a guide to the future. In contrast, the representatives of pragmatism used the scientific method to address the significant social, political and spiritual issues of human existence. Under these conditions, the problem of education was of particular importance, as it allowed rebuilding of the moral foundations of society and educating consciously active youth with a strong civic position in a relatively short period of time. This view was most clearly understood by John Dewey, an American thinker, who systematised the theoretical and methodological ideas of the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James and made considerable efforts to uphold democratic principles in education.

It is clear that much time has passed since the formulation of the educational doctrine of pragmatism. Nowadays, modern school faces new civilisation challenges. The world has changed significantly over the past half a century. In the twenty-first century, in the conditions of continuous computerisation of public space, critical thinking skills, creativity, communication, responsibility, cross-cultural interaction, flexibility of thought, initiative and so on gained much weight. Even so, the threats to democracy have never disappeared. Social reality is full of contradictions and value differences between communities are still significant. In addition, opportunities for technological, social, and informational influence on the community have increased. In order to preserve the values of democracy, there must be a special demand for quality education in society. It is possible to understand its defining principles by means of philosophy.

This issue has been partially explored in recent studies by Charles L. Lowery and Patrick M. Jenlink (2019), who provide an understanding of educational theory, educational practice, and the concept of a scholar-practitioner educational leader in J. Dewey's philosophy; Célestine L. D. Mangue and Jean Gonondo (2019), who study the specifics of school-based learning in the context of globalization; Dimitris Pavlis and John Gkiosos (2017), who investigate the peculiarities of the theoretical and methodological transition from pragmatism to progressive education; Ignacio Pérez-Ibáñez (2018), who analyses the social dimension of J. Dewey's thought on education; Sakshi Sharma, Rajesh Devi and Jyoti Kumari (2018), who consider more extensively the features of applying the pragmatism as a methodology in education. However, the question of democracy as a value and a landmark of education in terms of pragmatism in the context of the latest civilisational challenges remains unclear. Against this background, the article will argue that the pragmatic method used by J. Dewey in the philosophy of education has not yet lost its relevance and can become a reliable source of protection against all kinds of distortions and manipulation of public opinion through fake news or the imposition of post-truth politics.

To do this, one must first clearly understand what education is and what its tasks are. Therefore, to achieve this goal, let us analyse the conceptual dimension of the philosophy of education in terms of pragmatism, and then examine its defining principles, taking into account the socio-cultural realities of our time – the activity of the subject, communication as a justification for freedom and experience as a medium of true knowledge.

## PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION OF EDUCATION

Philosophy makes it possible to understand the essence of education. From the standpoint of pragmatism, the philosophy of education is a means of identifying and resolving contradictions that arise at the theoretical and practical level in the field of education. It does not aim to take a certain educational position, but merely seeks to delve into the essence of the problem of learning on the basis of a comprehensive and constructive analysis. It can be argued that the evolution of pragmatism has shown that philosophy of education has in fact become the heart of philosophy, and philosophy is a general theory of education, which is realised in the process of meaningful pedagogical practice and is consciously and functionally required in experience. The point is that philosophers can bring the greatest benefit to society when their reasoning contributes to its progress (mostly in the cultural and political spheres) by the power of their own judgments. Their thoughts empower individuals who can support the desire for peace in society and respect for the individual. The philosophical reflection gives a clear understanding, as Dimitris Pavlis and John Gkiosos rightly observed, that democratic education is a moral education (Pavlis & Gkiosos, 2017). In addition, such reflection helps to re-evaluate the values of society. However, it must be understood that changing the moral structures of society is a long process, the essence of which is to constantly improve ourselves by teaching and nurturing new spiritual values. Since it is much more difficult to teach people in adulthood than it is to teach them in childhood, attention to education must be decisive in the state. Philosophy should help to define the main educational principles, to combine the content of education with those higher cultural and democratic values, which should be cultivated by society for the sake of its well-being as a whole and worthy life of each individual in particular.

The basic pragmatic principles on which the philosophy of education is based can be formulated as follows: 1) democratic values are the ethical foundation of education; 2) science is a theoretical and methodological toolkit of education; 3) society is a set of human practices that is a benchmark for learning. This approach extends S. Sharma, R. Devi and J. Kumari's interpretation of education principles, which has reduced education solely to the social function and teaching children real-life experience (Sharma, Devi, & Kumari, 2018), since it provides the answer to the question of what to teach and what the social prerequisites of learning should be. The above principles define the conceptual framework of education – its *subject matter* (to study what benefits people), *methods* (to apply the methods that lead to the discovery of truth) and *result* (affirmation of the ideals of democracy — in particular, freedom and justice — is the aim of any teaching). The formation of specific curricula — an idea of the role of teacher and student in the learning process, its purpose, the school's integration into society, their mutual influence, etc. — takes place on the basis of these principles.

The philosophical comprehension of the problems of democratisation of education and rationalisation of the educational space is an important element of the spiritual culture of the community because the progress of democracy and the ideals of science is at present extremely slow. There are various reasons for this: the resistance of the political authorities, the low social activity and in general the social psychology (it is manifested through those precautions, which are caused by everything new and not fully known). It was obvious to J. Dewey that the earlier the learning process was democratised, the sooner society itself would reach all standards of democracy. For its part, changing ideas about the role of democracy in education is possible by understanding the essence of education itself. After all, as J. Dewey put it, "democracy is itself an educational principle, an educational measure and policy" (Dewey, 1946, p. 34). Moreover, without a good education, it is not possible to build institutions of democracy. Only by caring for education can democracy save itself. Education makes it possible to spread the ideals of democracy, to make them part of the mind and will of the citizens. Therefore, it is important that all members of the community have access to quality education. Such education makes it possible to lay the foundations for critical thinking and not to be subjected to the provocation of public opinion by manipulators.

Moreover, quality education is a means of changing the traditional way of social relations in many communities that adhere to a retrograde value system. In such societies, change is coming very slowly, and nowadays, such shameful phenomena as wars, famines, political strife and troubles, judicial arbitrariness or social instability remain a reality. To a large extent, the problem is that the process of humanisation of science and technology in general did not play the role it should have under the conditions of civilisational progress. Therefore, the values of democracy have to be opened and rediscovered every time, in search of new ways of organising coexistence in society and taking into account its new needs and demands. Such a methodological approach is quite logical and pragmatic. In this regard, J. Dewey put it this way:

Just as democracy in order to live must move and move forward, so schools in a democracy cannot stand still, cannot be satisfied and complacent with what has been accomplished, but must be willing to undertake whatever reorganisation of studies, of methods of teaching, of administration, including that larger organisation which concerns the relation of pupils and teachers to each other, and to the life of the community (Dewey, 1946, p. 48).

This means that the school must already prepare for the changes and explain what values are to be endorsed. It is important to understand, not just to know, because understanding lays the groundwork for meaningful action and generally for the active participation of individuals in community life.

## THE ACTIVITY OF THE SUBJECT

It should be noted that communication between people, critical thinking and social activity are defined as indispensable signs of coexistence of people in society by the very idea of democracy. It is no accident that one of the cornerstones of the philosophy of education in pragmatism is "Learning by doing." When individuals act, they must reconcile their individual actions with each other, know the purpose, understand how to achieve it, and operate a clearly defined set of tools to accomplish the tasks. Since the purpose of such activity is training itself, it must be understood that it is the acquisition of a set of skills that can subsequently be implemented in specific life situations. Hence, it is important to convince the student that it is important for him or her, both now and especially in the future. A pragmatic approach is to learn only specific things, not to spend time learning knowledge in all areas. In such circumstances, the teachers themselves must have a good understanding of the purpose, which seems to be somewhat broader than the needs of the individual. Knowledge by itself is not the purpose of learning. It is important that the spiritual standard of living in society grows. It will then be understood that the knowledge acquired in the school has become the basis for the sustainable development of the community and the state based on the principles of democracy. After all, fostering democratic values is one of the tasks of education that must itself meet these principles. As J. Dewey and Evelyn Dewey remarked: "The public schools started with the awakening of the spirit of liberty and democracy" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 167). These values are primarily manifested in the respectful attitude to all students and the absence of any stratification in the classes.

The first consideration of the universality of such a pragmatic approach lies in the weak theoretical basis of teaching. To my mind, the opinion that "pragmatic philosophy is a practical philosophy" (Sharma, Devi, & Kumari, 2018, p. 1554) is not pragmatic in itself, since it does not fully reveal the specifics of this philosophical method. With the emphasis on practice, theoretical knowledge is initially neglected. But over time, one must still come to the study of theory. The fact is that the conceptual framework underlying our knowledge makes it possible to unite it. The integrity of knowledge is one of the conditions for thoughtful and effective learning. Moreover, understanding arises when we can combine one piece of knowledge with others. It seems that the teaching theory itself should be completed for better understanding. But J. Dewey deliberately does not give such a complete theory. Firstly, it would repeat many of the already known principles. Secondly, with the development of science and technology, the content of educational courses will constantly change and the learning approaches will need to be improved each time. Thirdly, such a theory will seem very cumbersome, since effective learning requires a number of factors to be constantly taken into account: the level of students' mental abilities, their motivation, their mood, their life experience and so on. These factors influence the process of learning and the socialisation of the individual.

Therefore, the most complete type of activity is one that includes not only practical activity but also cognitive and aesthetic ones. The cognitive activity is aimed at exploring the internal laws of the interaction of phenomena, and the aesthetic activity aims at creating a variety of works of art, in which their authors insert numerous meanings and interpreters find them or produce their own. These activities empower the harmonious development of the individual, and the learning process becomes a constant acquisition of all new physical, psychological and social skills. Education becomes a means of training the mind. J. Dewey put it this way: "Isolation of subject matter from a social context is the chief obstruction in current practice to securing a general training of mind" (Dewey, 2004, p. 67). In other words, without social activity, knowledge acquisition becomes rote learning, and the student becomes a narrow-minded specialist who, when entering a new environment or when changing his or her own paradigm of activity, will every time be a profane starting the learning process from the beginning. In addition, it will be easy for him/her to impose misconceptions and an unfair value system. When learning becomes a training of skills and formation of new skills, students will easily be able to cope with the new social and cultural challenges that they are constantly facing. In the future, they will be able to acquire certain professionalism and show in it their individual abilities in the context of social relations, that is, to affirm their own life position and realise their own intellectual potential.

## COMMUNICATION AS JUSTIFICATION FOR FREEDOM

It is clear that critical thinking remains to be learned in communication with the teacher. To do this, one must first understand the roles they play in the engagement process. So for the person of the student on whom pragmatism places particular emphasis, J. Dewey and E. Dewey put it this way:

If we want, then, to find out how education takes place most successfully, let us go to the experiences of children where learning is a necessity, and not to the practices of the schools where it is largely an adornment, a superfluity and even an unwelcome imposition (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 3).

Before teaching something, the teacher must understand what the student already knows. The educator should identify and develop the student's innate abilities in the learning process. It is necessary to proceed from the needs, opportunities and interests of the students and, at each stage of their spiritual formation, give them exactly what is important and interesting in their view. This is the conception of education as "natural development." According to this conception, the best learning outcomes can be achieved when teaching children in childhood what they need as children and not as adults; to teach what they can understand. In order to intensify the learning process and improve the attitude to learning, both the teaching methods and the curriculum need to be changed: to give children greater personal freedom, to encourage initiative, to pay special attention to educational games, and to provide pupils with personal experience that is more important than the information from books. This approach will allow them not to be distracted, but to fully immerse themselves in the educational process. Reacting to the manifestations of children's inclinations must be wise. Barbara Schecter also points out that, as J. Dewey argued, in the course of the child's natural development, one should not forget that "progress is a human responsibility" (Schecter, 2011, p. 256), and so it is

up to the teacher to decide which of the child's makings we need to develop more than others. After all, this specificity of learning is characteristic of all people in general, regardless of age; for instance, adults are only interested in learning what they need and what they are comfortable with. Therefore, as Kyle A. Greenwalt rightly observes in analysing the relevant J. Dewey achievements, teachers themselves must learn and this fact cannot be neglected in the democratic development of society (Greenwalt, 2016).

Education leads to the realisation of freedom as an immanent characteristic of a human being. The most important freedom for learning is freedom of mind – the right to make observations and to express opinions freely. Freedom gives the opportunity to show the character of the student. But it is not necessary in itself, to satisfy its own whims, but to produce self-control in an environment free from external control. The fact is that pursuing uncontrolled internal impulses is even worse than external control. Freedom imposes additional responsibility on students as they, as a teacher, begin to participate in determining the purpose of their own learning. To choose a goal, both circumstances and prior experience are taken into account. Thereafter, a balanced conclusion is drawn as to how to combine them and what plan and methods of action to apply.

It is clear that the case of academic freedom at school is only a partial case of the implementation of freedom in society. But more broadly, freedom as a value is not advisable to counteract authority, since, as history has shown, individuals often prefer authority and guaranteed stability. Therefore, a pragmatic approach is not to oppose authority (stability) and freedom (change), but rather to try to combine them so that authority itself promotes the changes that are needed for social development, and that people, having freedom, understand their responsibility for what they have done. In addition, they have to be aware of the need for reasonably organised social control. After all, there is no conscious freedom without a system of restrictions and control.

However, it should not be considered that the student is the only significant person in the educational process. The learning organisation includes both communication between students and communication between students and teachers. Therefore, the personality of the teacher is equally important. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the child's abilities are timely identified and developed in the right direction. It should be noted that the teacher exercises social control on behalf of the group, not as a manifestation of his/her own authority. Teachers need to have individual freedom in the same way that students have. Together with the teacher, students must go from their own experience to the experience of humanity. To this end, a curriculum must be developed. It will allow society to exercise social control over what is happening at school. The main purpose of the organisation of learning and discipline, as J. Dewey remarked, "is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by means of acquisition of the organised bodies of information and prepared forms of skill, which comprehend the material of instruction" (Dewey, 2015, p. 18). Only teachers fully understand the system of the educational process. It is important to remember that they are the leaders in the group and that they know the direction to go in order to achieve results. They should listen to the children, but also ensure that the children listen to them. From a pragmatic point of view, they should be at the same time an undisputed moral authority, mentor, and friend to students.

After all, the issues of the working atmosphere in the team, communication of teachers with each other, correlations between teachers and leadership, and in general between school and state are also important. This is the set of questions that, in interpreting J. Dewey's theory (Dewey, 1902a), becomes the basis for affirming the value of freedom in the academic environment. If the teacher feels a violation of personal rights, lack of respect from management, or neglect of academic freedom, then this state of affairs will create the preconditions for extrapolation of this kind of relationship model to the students. Therefore, any school administration acts as a kind of mediator between the students and the teacher, and how objectively it will evaluate each party depends on the proper functioning of the entire educational system.

In addition, it should be borne in mind that the education system is not separate from those processes that take place in the state. Pragmatism emphasises the importance of interconnecting the sources of our experience. Indeed, school knowledge must be organically linked to what the child is taught at home and can apply later in adulthood. What we can learn in school is only a small part of our knowledge. Its role is very often exaggerated, especially when subjects in school are not connected with the life of society. And this connection should be necessary since even before school, children have some experience to meet basic needs. They communicate at home, outdoors, during vacations, and nowadays, especially on social networks, etc. Children quickly grasp everything they think is important. This allows them to navigate the flow of news relevant to their age. Thus, personality development is influenced by both formal education and non-formal. Therefore, J. Dewey quite rightly noted that "one of the weightiest problems with which the philosophy of education has to cope is the method of keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional, modes of education" (Dewey, 1955, p. 9).

That is why it is important for education to meet the demands of the time. This requirement can be most fully implemented in a progressive school, not in a traditional school or new school. The traditional school says that "the child is simply the immature being who is to be matured" (Dewey, 1902b, p. 8). The communication between the teacher and the student in such a school looked this way: the teacher explained everything, and it was enough for the student to simply agree and be obedient. For a traditional school, discipline and humility are important, not freedom and initiative. But such a school forgets that "learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within" (Dewey, 1902b, p. 9). Without the internal freedom of students and their active learning position, it is not possible to achieve significant educational results. The situation with the new school is no better either. Instead of discipline, it offers complete freedom of action

and seeks to replace theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Having complete freedom makes it very difficult for the student to choose the right path to develop their skills. Free, creative search for one's place in the world can be very time-consuming. It does not always lead to success and personal self-realisation. In addition, it is even more difficult for children than for adults to understand what direction society will take and what place they will take in the future to fully realise their abilities and be of value to the community. The teacher should be the advisor to help students find their own path. A person with more experience is better aware of the trends that are available in the world and can make the right decision faster. Therefore, the formation of the principles of new education in a negative way (as a simple denial of everything that was before) is extremely unconstructive. The past experience cannot be dismissed because it is the key to understanding the current state of affairs. The past is a means of understanding the present.

Pragmatism opposes the dogmatisation of education, and it does not matter whether such dogma is discipline (as in traditional education) or the personal freedom of the student (as in new education). Any theory must be critical about its content and open to innovation. Its purpose is not to generate slogans, but to explain what freedom of the student means, how past experience will prove to be a means of effective action in the future and how to learn better so that knowledge becomes a means of overcoming the difficulties in the present. In such circumstances, the effectiveness of learning will be determined by the ease and preparation of teachers in communication with students and the student's clear awareness of the importance of their own intellectual skills to meet the various social and political challenges of our time. That is why it is also important to pay attention to the concept of experience.

#### EXPERIENCE AS A MEDIUM OF TRUE KNOWLEDGE

Pragmatism indicates that our actions are determined by the knowledge we have (Synytsia, 2019). Knowledge of the facts is required to properly evaluate a particular event. True knowledge as the basis of experience is the key to promoting the value of social justice and the progress of democracy. It is no accident that J. Dewey noted that "[a] democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 2004, p. 83). Our worldview, which is very often full of prejudices and misconceptions, depends on our experience. Therefore, learning very often becomes a reconstruction of experience.

For its part, experience is a dynamic formation that determines the essence of the person's life-world. The learning experience encourages the emergence and systematisation of new facts, including how to find causal relationships. Without the systematisation of knowledge, the ability to think is weakened. The most reliable method of formation of educational knowledge is a rational method of science. It enables to direct our thinking to discover new truths. As J. Dewey remarked, "scientific method is the only authentic means at our command for getting at the significance of our everyday experiences of the world in which we live" (Dewey, 2015, p. 88). All because science makes it possible to know the nature of things and to formulate the right experience. And it is not only about the natural sciences. According to pragmatism, it is important that socio-humanitarian knowledge is a component of experience, since the very interest in learning has a distinct moral component. Such knowledge enables us to better understand who a person is and what his or her place in the world is, to understand the nature of social processes and to gain a deeper knowledge of ourselves. Moreover, without the socio-humanitarian component, knowledge will be incomplete, and education will not make it possible to understand social reality in the unity of cause and effect that we experience daily. The critique of the expediency of the humanities is a revolt against science. This state of affairs will only widen the gap between theory and practice, but the aim of science and philosophy of education, on the contrary, is to integrate them and, thus, to organise our experience.

In general, experience is based on two principles. The first one is the principle of integrity (the experiential continuum), the second one is the principle of interaction. According to the former, knowledge should not be isolated and in general "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 2015, p. 35). At the heart of this principle is a habit. However, it is not once and for all rooted in human behaviour. On the contrary, developing a habit means that the experience we have is renewing our personality. Habit determines our intellectual and emotional stance on events. The latter states that " experience is truly experience only when objective conditions are subordinated to what goes on within the individuals having the experience" (Dewey, 2015, p. 41). That is, an experience is gained only on the basis of a combination of objective conditions and subjective intentions. Without interest in learning, the student will not gain the experience that the teacher gives.

There is an organic connection between learning and personal experience. They are not identical and can both help and harm each other. It should be understood that not every experience is equally important. The criterion for the importance of experience is the result that can be obtained in the future. Experience changes not only our inner nature, but also the world around us. All the advantages of civilisation are an objective condition for gaining new experience and a guarantee of non-return to primitive times. A negative experience is also an experience, but it is not well adapted to future challenges. It forms a stable life position as a foundation for further learning, which can lead to frustration. In general, unsystematic knowledge causes scattering of attention and complicates the acquisition of new experience. Such an experience is not useful – it only weakens cognitive abilities, in particular the ability to independently grasp the nature of new knowledge. As a result, it becomes difficult to evaluate the importance of certain ethical judgments and to check the significance of certain social values.

In this regard, to my mind, it is necessary to distinguish between material and spiritual knowledge. Science is rapidly changing our conceptions of material things, but the spiritual values of each generation are being rediscovered, especially in our time, when different kinds of gadgets have caught the people's attention and the computer has become a kind of expansion of our consciousness. Little attention has been paid to this, as if progressive education at J. Dewey was not intended to cover technological advances (Webster, 2008). But nowadays it is often impossible to ignore the fact that technological means make it possible to quickly find the information you need and navigate the world, but at the same time, there is a growing threat of obtaining or spreading false information, usually on social, political or historical issues that may be interpreted differently. Such interpretations direct our attention to the realm of ethical judgments that are not verifiable as empirical judgments. Thus, any change in the value orientations of society must certainly be well thought out, since human nature (intentions, ambitions, aspirations and so on) is as it used to be. And despite various misinterpretations of social phenomena or human existence, the need for communication, respect for human dignity, freedom, recognition, justice, etc. will remain significant. The need to understand the essence of learning, in other words, the need for a philosophy of education will remain constitutive.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The research has shown that the methodology of pragmatism is a powerful means of resolving contradictions in the philosophy of education, which has become the medium of affirmation of the democracy values (freedom, human dignity, justice, etc.). In spite of numerous difficulties, science and public activity are slowly changing our ideas about true values and serve to democratise education. J. Dewey argued that education forms the nature of personality and the more the school focuses on the active position of students in learning, on free communication between all participants in the learning process, respect for personal freedom and taking into account the needs, abilities and interests of each student, the earlier ideals of democracy will become available. At the same time, experience gained as a medium of true knowledge and a prerequisite for critical thinking will hinder the spread of misinformation and false meanings in the society, prevent the imposition of unjustified beliefs and guarantee the development of humanistic values in the future.

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